

DelaWell aims to steer workers from health risks

By GARY HABER, The News Journal

State employees and retirees will be eligible for free health-risk evaluations and help in adopting healthful habits under a new initiative launched this week.

The goal of the state's "DelaWELL" program is to reach people early before potential health dangers turn into major problems and persuade people to make lifestyle changes such as quitting smoking, losing weight and following healthful diets, Gov. Ruth Ann Minner's office said.

The program, which in its first phase, will be open to about 40,000 state employees and retirees. It is one of a host of health care initiatives Minner unveiled in January. It puts Delaware among a growing number of states taking a page from the private sector and starting the kind of health and wellness programs that have become widespread among private employers.

About 43 percent of large companies offer health-risk assessments and behavioral-change programs, and another 17 percent said they plan to offer them, according to a recent survey commissioned by the National Business Group on Health, a Washington D.C.-based nonprofit that represents some of the nation's largest companies on health care issues.

In addition to Delaware, at least six other states, including Kentucky, Oklahoma and Rhode Island, have launched health and wellness programs for state workers, as state governments struggle to cope with spiraling health care costs for their workers and retirees.

"It's extremely important that they're doing it and they deserve a lot of credit for it," said Helen Darling, president of the National Business Group on Health, referring to Delaware's initiative. "Changing behavior is very hard, but they deserve a lot of credit for taking it on."

In Delaware, health care for state workers and retirees is projected to cost \$457 million this year, of which \$286.6 million will come from the state's general fund, according to figures from the state Office of Management and Budget. The state's share has risen by \$54.8 million, up from \$221.8 million in 2003.

"One of the biggest drivers of budget growth in the last six to eight years has been health care," said Lt. Gov. John Carney, who chairs the Delaware Health Care Commission.

The DelaWELL program builds on an existing state programs that encourages workers to be aware of their cholesterol and blood-sugar levels and a pilot program in which 1,500 state employees received comprehensive physical exams.

"This is the next logical step in helping our employees take better care of themselves," said State Treasurer Jack Markell, who was part of the five-member State Employee Benefits Committee that oversees the program.

The program will take a multi-level approach. Those whose health assessment indicates at least two risk factors -- such as smoking and obesity -- will be eligible to work with a lifestyle coach provided by StayWell Health Management, the St. Paul, Minn.-based company that is administering the program. Those with three or more risk factors will also be eligible for a comprehensive physical examination, including a stress test that will provide them with detailed information about their health.

To encourage people to join the program, the first 6,000 people who sign up will receive \$75 in their paycheck or pension check.

Contact Gary Haber at 324-2878 or ghaber@delawareonline.com.